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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to test the following notions: (1) blacks are less committed to the norm of legitimacy and; (2) black women have less reason and desire than white women to marry--whether or not they are unmarried mothers. The data are drawn from a questionnaire administered to 704 obstetrical patients, 81 percent of whom were black. Separate comparisons were made for single and married respondents. Few of the blacks felt that illegitimacy is wrong, but black-white differences on this issue were small. However, the blacks (1) less frequently preferred marital childbearing; (2) more often held negative attitudes toward marriage in general; (3) less often felt that husbands they knew measured up on certain marital behaviors which they considered important; and (4) more often believed that men would rather be single than married. For all but the last of these four findings, the racial differences were greater for the single than the married respondees. Marital attitudes and preferences for marital childbearing appear to be factors in the lower-income black women's somewhat lower rate of ever marrying, and her much greater tendency to delay marriage until sometime after she has borne children. (Author/LKP)

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ILLEGITIMACY AND RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE*

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ILLEGITIMACY AND RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE

Nearly one-third of all nonwhite births in the U.S. are illegitimate (Zelnik and Kantner, 1970:5). Illegitimacy rates and ratios are about seven to eight times as high for blacks as they are for whites (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1968:4-5; Whelan, 1972:15).[1] Black, but not white, unwed mothers are somewhat less likely than other women to ever marry (Cutright, 1971:8), but the major difference between blacks and whites is in the timing of marriage and childbearing. The practical significance of this, in terms of economic, social-psychological and health costs, is considerable (Gibbs, 1973).

Among the factors which have been advanced to explain racial differences in illegitimacy are the related notions that (1) blacks are less committed to the norm of legitimacy (e.g., Pope, 1969; Zelnik and Kantner, 1970) and (2) that black women have less reason and desire than white women to marry--whether or not they are unmarried mothers (Pope, 1969). Pope (1967, 1969) suggested these generalizations in an effort to interpret a variety of black-white differences found in a large study of unwed mothers from selected counties of North Carolina (Bowerman, et al., 1966).[2] The purpose of this paper is to test these propositions.[3] Both propositions often are assumed in the literature, but they have received little systematic testing.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The data are drawn from parts of a questionnaire administered to 704 obstetrical patients, age 17 and older, who delivered a first live baby at a large county hospital in Atlanta during the period September, 1970 through the first part of May, 1971. The hospital serves the medically indigent of the two most populous counties of the Atlanta SMSA. In 1970 move than 6,000 women delivered at this hospital; eighty-one percent

of these were black.

Subjects were interviewed on the obstetrical wards within one to three days after delivery. Available interviewing time permitted interviewing more than 50 percent of the patients eligible for the study. The refusal rate was less than one percent.[4] Blacks comprise 84 percent of the sample. A close correspondence was found between sample and population characteristics. The comparisons (not presented) show that age and marital status breakdowns for both the black and the white portions of the sample are within several percentage points of their respective distributions for the population of eligible patients. Furthermore, it was determined that more than 70 percent of Atlanta blacks, who deliver in Atlanta, deliver at this hospital.[5] Although these data are not available by income, it is likely that nearly all of the lower-income blacks in the City deliver at this hospital.

These data suggest that the black segment of the sample is quite representative of all primiparous blacks in the Atlanta SMSA, and probably an even better sample of lower-income, central-city primiparas. The same case cannot be made for the white respondents since only about nine percent of Atlanta whites deliver at this hospital. However, the black and the white segments of the sample are quite similar in the distribution of certain key demographic and socio-economic variables,[6] so it seems reasonable to compare racial categories for purposes of this paper. One major exception is marital status. Consistent with what others have found, a larger proportion of whites than blacks were married at delivery (64% vs. 37%). Since marital status is statistically related to some of the marriage attitude items, most of the following analysis will be presented separately for marital status categories. Five divorcees and two respondents of unknown marital status were dropped from the analysis.

FINDINGS

Commitment to legitimacy norms Table 1 indicates that a somewhat higher percentage of married whites than married blacks did answer that

(Table 1 about here)

"having a baby without being married is wrong," but the table also shows that single blacks and whites do not differ on this item. Although the data indicate that less than one-third of the blacks say that nonmartial childbearing is wrong, there is not consistent support for the notion that blacks are less committed to legitimacy than whites.

Rodman (1966), reacting to research done in the Caribbean, has argued that marriage and legitimate childbearing are not just matters of right or wrong, and that other investigators have failed to distinguish between preferences and norms. Lower-class persons prefer marriage and legitimate childbearing, but due to greater "vulnerability to environmental circumstances," also accept non-legal unions and legal illegitimacy (a lower-class "value stretch"). When respondents who had indicated that unwed motherhood is not wrong were asked whether a woman having a baby is usually "better off" married or single, or if its makes any difference, a significantly lower percentage of single blacks answered "married" (Table 2). The percentage difference between black and white married respondents, although smaller, is in the same direction.

(Table 2 about here)

Taken as a whole, the data are consistent with Rodman's contention that nonmarital as well as marital childbearing is "normative" in the lower classes (only a minority of respondents in each of the categories of Table 1 would say that nonmarital childbearing is "wrong"), but they also show a marked racial difference among single respondents in degree of preference for marital childbearing (Table 2).[7] Unlike the other

respondents in Table 2, only a minority of single blacks stated a preference for marital childbearing. Assuming that those who felt that illegitimacy is wrong would prefer marital childbearing, 38 percent of all the single blacks, compared with 17 percent of all single whites, did not even prefer marital childbearing. Part of the explanation may be that lower-income black women hold more negative attitudes toward marriage in general--whether or not children are involved; more specifically, that they can expect to receive less from marriage than other women.

Attitudes toward marriage. Table 3 presents the distribution of responses to the question, "In general, do you think a woman's life is better

(Table 3 about here)

if she is married or if she stays single?" Although only a minority in each category answered that single life is better, the blacks more often gave this response. Among the single respondents the difference is quite large and statistically significant.

Pope (1969:761-763), attempting to explain black-white differences in the timing of marriage and related matters, has suggested that major factors affecting a woman's decision about marriage are the advantages and disadvantages that she perceives as associated with the marital role, and that one way to organize these factors for systematic data collection is to see whether the woman expects the key rights often associated with marriage to be associated with her marriage. To this end, Pope devised a list of seven areas in which a woman may have expectations regarding marriage. Table 4 presents questions about the behavior of husbands, based mainly on Pope's list of expectation areas, and the percentages of

(Table 4 about here)

blacks and whites who indicated that these behaviors would be important to their marriages. The major finding is that the items, as a group, are

deemed important by high percentages of both the blacks and the whites. On most of the items, the scores are very similar, but the blacks do score higher on each of the three items where the percentage difference exceeds seven points. Interestingly, the last item, dealing with equal freedom of action in marriage, stands out from the others in that it is considered important by only about 60 percent of both groups. Apparently both the blacks and the whites were relatively traditional in their attitudes toward equality in marriage.

In an effort to determine the respondent's perception of the advantages and disadvantages which she could expect from marriage, she was asked in another section of the questionnaire--and in a different ordering of questions--to indicate how many of the husbands she knew behaved in the ways she had previously described as important or not to her marriage.[8] Only the respondents who previously had affirmed the importance of the items are included in this part of the analysis. Married respondents were reminded not to think of their own husbands; however, as a check on the applicability of responses to subjects' own husbands and boyfriends, each subject was asked after the questions were completed whether her baby's father would be the same, better, or worse than most of the husbands she had described, and only 33 percent answered that he would be "better."[9]

Table 5 presents the percentages of respondents, by race and marital status, who answered that "all" or "most" husbands behave in such ways.

(Table 5 about here)

Thirteen of the fourteen percentage comparisons favor the white respondents, the exception being the small difference between married respondents on the item dealing with husbands causing trouble or getting involved with the police. Eight of the fourteen percentage differences are

statistically significant, the same four items producing statistically significant differences for both the married and the single categories.[10] Particularly large are the differences between single blacks and whites on (1) companionship, (2) husband respected in the community, and (3) freedom of activity equal to husband's. On these three comparisons, the blacks are well below the 50 percent mark and the whites well about it. Clearly, the black women are considerably less likely to feel that most husbands measure up on certain marital behaviors which they feel are important, and presumably this affects the black woman's assessment of her own chances in marriage, her general attitude toward marriage, and ultimately her decision about whether to marry and when to marry.

Consistent with the back woman's more negative attitudes toward husbands and marriage is her belief that most men prefer to stay single. Table 6 shows that three-fourths of both the married and the single blacks thought that most men would rather be single than married. The percen-

(Table 6 about here)

tages for whites are significantly lower, although more than half of the whites also indicated that men would rather be single. To the extent that the perceptions of these women are accurate, men's attitudes also may constitute more of an impediment to black than white marriages.[11]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Among the factors which have been advanced to explain black-white differences in illegitimacy rates and the timing of marriage are the related notions that (1) blacks are less committed to the norm of legitimacy and (2) that black women have less reason and desire than white women to marry--whether or not they are unmarried mothers. Data from a larger study of lower-income primiparous blacks and whites were used to test these notions. Separate comparisons were made for single and

married respondents.

Few of the blacks felt that illegitimacy is wrong, but black-white differences on this issue were small. However, the blacks (1) less frequently preferred marital childbearing, (2) more often held negative attitudes toward marriage in general, (3) less often felt that husbands they knew measured up on certain marital behaviors which they considered important (and presumably, less often than white women expected to receive certain advantages from marriage), and (4) more often believed that men would rather be single than married. For all but the last of these four findings, the racial differences were greater for the single than the married respondents. The conclusion seems warranted that marital attitudes and preferences for marital childbearing, but not necessarily legitimacy norms in the sense of "right" or "wrong" beheavior, are factors in the lower-income black woman's somewhat lower rate of ever marrying and her much greater tendency to delay marriage until sometime after she has borne children.[12]

The findings raise the possibility that more of the black than the white women would rather live with a boyfriend initially than marry him, even when marriage is possible, possibly to maintain the relationship when circumstances make a legal commitment seem unwise. However, data (not shown) do not support this. Not only did a very large percentage of both black and white single respondents reportthat they were not living with someone, but a majority of all respondents, with the exception of single whites, reported that "a couple's living together without being married is wrong"--63 percent of the single blacks, compared to 39 percent of the single whites.[13] Furthermore, two-thirds or more of the subjects responded negatively to the following questions, and there were only negligible percentage differences between blacks and whites.

1. Do you think that a woman's problems with a man would be less if she didn't marry him but only lived with him?
2. Do you think she would have more freedom living with a boyfriend than with a husband?
3. What if she were unmarried and living with her boyfriend? Do you think her life would probably be better than if she lived by herself?

In conclusion, it appears that the black women reject the living arrangement even more than marriage, and that their more negative assessments of husbands should be extended to include boyfriends, if not men in general.

Table 1. Percentage of Respondents Who Answered "Yes" to the Question, "Would you say that having a baby without being married is wrong?" by Race and Marital Status*

Married		Single	
Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
33% (216)	46% (69)	28% (367)	31% (36)
$p<.07$		N.S.	

Number of Respondents = 688
No Answer = 9
Total 697

*Numbers in parentheses are base N's for the percentages. Probabilities are based on corrected chi-square values and are presented if $p<.10$.

Table 2. Of the respondents who answered that unwed motherhood is not wrong, the percentage who indicated that "a woman is usually better off if she is married when she has a baby," by race and marital status*

Married		Single	
Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
69% (142)**	79% (34)	47% (262)	71% (24)
N.S.***		p<.01	

Number of respondents = 462

*The other response alternatives were "a woman is usually better off if she has a baby without being married" (indicated by less than two percent of the blacks and four percent of the whites) and "it doesn't usually make any difference."

**Numbers in parentheses are base N's for the percentages.

***Probabilities, based on corrected chi-square values, are presented if p<.10.

Table 3. Percentage of respondents who answered "single" to the question, "In general, do you think a woman's life is better if she is married or if she stays single?" by race and marital status*

Married respondents		Single respondents	
Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
18% (217)	9% (70)	37% (368)	14% (36)
N.S.		p<.01	

Number of respondents = 691
No answer = 6
Total 697

*Numbers in the parentheses are base N's for the percentages. Probabilities, based on corrected chi-square values, are presented if p<.10.

Table 4. Percentage of respondents answering "yes" to questions about the importance to their marriages of certain behaviors of husbands, by race*

"Would it be very important to your marriage. . .	Blacks		Whites	
for the husband to help with the children when he is home?"	92%	(587)**	87%	(109)
for your husband not to run around with other women?"	93%	(587)	94%	(109)
that he does not spend more of his money on himself than his family?"	95%	(587)	87%	(109)
for him to be a good companion whom you can talk to and have fun with?"	100%	(587)	100%	(109)
for your husband to be respected and looked up to in the community?"	89%	(586)	76%	(108)
that he does not cause trouble or ever get involved with the police?"	97%	(587)	87%	(109)
that you have as much freedom as your husband to do what you want?"	61%	(587)	62%	(109)

Number of respondents = 696 (694)
No answer = 1 (3)
Total 697

*Unmarried respondents were asked to answer as if they were married.
**Numbers in the parentheses are base N's for the percentages.

Table 5. Of the respondents who indicated that certain behaviors of husbands would be important to their marriages (Table 4), the percentage who answered that "all" or "most" husbands behave in such ways, by race and marital status*

"Think of most married couples you know. . .	Married		Single	
	Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
How many husbands would you guess help with the children when they are home?"	33% (195)**	49% (61) p<.03***	31% (340)	48% (31) p<.09
How many would you guess run around with other women?"	28% (206)	22% (67) N.S.	42% (340)	29% (34) N.S.
About how many of these husbands you know spend more of their money on themselves than their families?"	13% (201)	7% (61) N.S.	16% (352)	13% (31) N.S.
How many are good companions whom their wives can talk to and have fun with?"	47% (216)	66% (70) p<.02	33% (366)	58% (36) p<.01
How many would you guess are respected and looked up to in the community?"	41% (189)	59% (54) p<.03	36% (328)	81% (27) p<.001
About how many husbands cause trouble or ever get involved with the police?"	10% (210)	13% (60) N.S.	14% (358)	9% (33) N.S.
In about how many of these marriages does the wife have as much freedom as her husband to do what she wants?"	23% (121)	40% (48) p<.05	18% (235)	56% (18) p<.001

*The other response alternatives were "some," "few," "none," and "don't know."
**Numbers in the parentheses are base N's for the percentages. The base N's and the total number of respondents vary from one question to another because the analysis was done only on those who had answered "yes" to the comparable questions in Table 4.
***Probabilities, based on corrected chi-square values, are presented if p<.10.

Table 6. Percentage of respondents who answered "single" to the question, "Do you think most men would rather be married or stay single?" by race and marital status*

Married respondents		Single respondents	
Blacks	Whites	Blacks	Whites
75% (220)	56% (71)	78% (370)	56% (36)
$p<.01$		$p<.01$	

Number of respondents = 697

*Numbers in the parentheses are base N's for the percentages. The probabilities are based on corrected chi-square values.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Much but not all of the difference can be accounted for by racial differences in economic status and in rates of second and higher order illegitimacies. Cutright (1971:8) reports that about half the racial difference can be explained in terms of the larger proportion of nonwhites than whites who are poor. In addition, nonmaritally pregnant whites are more likely than nonwhites to abort or to marry before child delivery. The difference in marrage rates during pregnancy is suggested by Whelan's (1972) record-linkage data for Massachusetts which indicate that the five-to-one black-white differential in first birth illegitimacy ratios reduces to about two to one for first births conceived out of wedlock.

[2]Pope (1969:761) reports that ". . . the Negro woman less often than the white woman had marital plans before her pregnancy occurred, even though she was more often in a long-term courting relationship of which her family and friends were aware . . . . that the Negro in comparison to the white woman less often married, but, if she married, more often married the alleged father rather than some other man; more often kept her child and was overwhelmingly advised by others to do so; more often did not want to marry her sex partner after discovery of her pregnancy if she had not been planning marriage beforehand with him; more often associated with her sex partner after the birth (if not married); and more often felt marriage to her sex partner in the future was a definite possibility."

FOOTNOTES (continued)

[3]The second proposition, that black women have less reason and desire than white women to marry, is discussed by Pope (1969) in terms of (1) incentives to marry and (2) sanctions for marriage-relevant acts. Incentives involve her assessment of the rewards to be gained by marriage, and consistent with Pope's suggestion, are tested in this study in terms of general attitude toward marriage and more specifically, the advantages and disadvantages which the woman perceives as associated with the marital role. Sanctions, the pattern of rewards and punishments which others provide in response to her marriage-relevant acts, is not dealt with in this paper.

[4]The interviewers were young, college-graduate black females who were able to develop rapport with patients. Most interviews were completed in 30 minutes. The questionnaire and further details about the sample and data collection procedures can be found in Gibbs (1973).

[5]Strictly speaking, this statistic pertains to Fulton County which includes almost all of the City of Atlanta as well as some of the additional population of the five-county SMSA. In 1970, Fulton County included 44 percent of the SMSA population and 76 percent of the SMSA nonwhites. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971).

[6]Since the hospital serves the medically indigent population, both the black and the white income distributions are skewed. However, the hospital eligibility scale allows incomes somewhat above the federal poverty line, and exceptions are grnated for certain reasons. No doubt there is some concealment of income as well. Broken into one-year categories, the age distributions for blacks and whites are almost identical. Slightly more than 60 percent of both groups were 17 to 19 years of age, and more than 90 percent were less than 25 years old. There is a slight tendency

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FOOTNOTES (continued)

for the sex partners of the whites to be older than those of the blacks, but for both groups approximately 80 percent of the fathers were less than 25 years old. A higher percentage of blacks reported 12 years of education, but when viewed in terms of 9 to 12 years of education, the black and the white percentages are, respectively, 86 and 80. On the other hand, whites were more likely to have grown up in white-collar and craftsman families. The greatest occupational differences in families of orientation are the excess of whites in the craftsmen and kindred category and the excess of blacks in the domestic category. The difference between blacks and whites in the percent whose fathers had been present when respondents were pre-teenagers is not large (72 percent for whites and 62 percent for blacks). Blacks were more stable residentially than whites. Thirty-eight percent of the blacks, compared with 65 percent of the whites, had changed their addresses within the year before the interview. In addition, 59 percent of the blacks, but only 38 percent of the whites, were born in metropolitan Atlanta.

[7]Rodman developed his "value-stretch" hypothesis in the context of Caribbean data (Rodman, 1963, 1966). In a later article, Rodman and associates (1969) compare their Trinidad sample with a small sample of low-income, Detroit blacks. The more conventional attitudes of the Detroit women are interpreted in terms of "more pressure to adhere to conventional patterns in Detroit than in Trinidad." However, the same interpretation would not seem to be sufficient to account for differences between the Detroit blacks and the blacks of this study. Not only did the Detroit blacks exceed the blacks of this study in percentage preferring marital childbearing, but they also differened in the fact that a slight majority felt that "it's wrong to have illegitimate children."

FOOTNOTES (continued)

[8]Of course, the assumptions are that most husbands whom she would have a chance to know and observe are similar in background characteristics to the men available to her for marriage and that her estimate of her own marriage possibilities is based in some measure on her perception of the marital behavior of these men.

[9]Understandably, the single blacks (27%) and whites (11%) were less likely than the married blacks (49%) and whites (35%) to feel that their babies' fathers would be "better" than the husbands they had described. The lower percentages for single respondents suggest that their assessments better indicate what they can expect in marriage than the assessments of married respondents indicate level of satisfaction with current marriages. However, it should be kept in mind that the marital dissolution rate is very high for lower-income blacks in particular, (Bernard, 1966) and thus, many of the married women may again face decisions about living with someone, marriage, and the timing of these events.

[10]It could be argued that the responses of the married subjects reflect a rationalization of marriage more than an assessment of most husbands' marital behavior. In general, the married respondents did make somewhat more positive evaluations, but the pattern of percentage differences for the married subjects is quite similar to that for the singles. If the logic of this analysis is correct--that expecting to receive less from marriage impedes marriage--one would expect the assessments of married respondents to be somewhat more positive. Also, when comparing attitudes by race in a childbearing population, it is necessary to present results for both married and single respondents since a disproportionate number of blacks are unmarried at delivery.

FOOTNOTES (continued)

[11]Broderick (1965), in a study of Pennsylvania adolescents, found that black males were indeed less interested in future marriage than black girls and whites of both sexes. The black males, but not the other respondents, showed a progressive disenchantment with marriage from age 10 to 17.

[12]Kublesky and Obordo (1972), in a study of high school girls in three rural Texas counties, suggest another, possibly related reason for delay of marriage by blacks. Having found that the blacks exceed the whites by about two years in average desired age at marriage, as well as the blacks more often expecting to work full-time after marrage, they speculate that both of these orientations involve motives indicative of a greater concern by the black girls for economic and material status. It seems quite possible that such economic concern, if it is a reason for desired later marriage, stems from the black girl's more negative assessment of potential husbands and not necessarily just the husband's economic prospects.

[13]It is difficult to explain why many of the respondents felt that living together without marriage is wrong but that unwed motherhood is not wrong (Table 1). Since this is true of both the married and single blacks, the answer would not seem to lie in the rationalization of an act already committed. Rodman (1969:319) found the same pattern in his study of low-income Detroit blacks, but his explanation, involving the greater acceptability of less visible "deviant" behaviors and the closer link between illegitimate children and premarital intercourse, seems at best to be incomplete. Perhaps the lesser disapproval of unwed motherhood stems in part from a special importance attached to motherhood, regardless of circumstances. Consistent with this interpretation is the finding (not shown) that the blacks, in particular, considered abortion and giving up a baby for adoption to be far worse than unwed motherhood. Also, it may be the case that these women feel that an illegitimate child

FOOTNOTES (continued)

represents only an occasional indescretion, for which one pays by accepting the child and taking responsibility for it, while living together represents a repeated pattern of questionable behavior for which one does not accept the responsibilities of legal marriage.

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